

Professor Who Called Students ‘Vectors of Disease’ in Video Is Suspended

Barry Mehler of Ferris State University was put on paid leave after uploading the bizarre welcome video, but some of his peers said his rights of free expression were being curtailed.

By Eduardo Medina

Jan. 16, 2022

In a profanity-laced introduction video for a history class, Prof. Barry Mehler wears an astronaut-style helmet with air filters, tells his Ferris State University students that they are “vectors of disease” and says that their grades are predetermined, regardless of their efforts.

“I will not take questions in class because I’m wearing this” helmet “in order to stay alive,” Professor Mehler, 74, says toward the end of the video, using an expletive. “So please, come to class. Enjoy the show. I’ll be there regularly because I have no choice.”

The bizarre 14-minute video, which has been viewed more than 360,000 times since it was posted on his YouTube page last Sunday, resulted in Professor Mehler’s being placed on paid suspension while university officials investigated his eccentric introduction to the new semester, according to Sandy Gholston, a university spokesman.

David Eisler, the president of the university, which is in Big Rapids, Mich., about 150 miles northwest of Detroit, said in a statement that he had been “shocked and appalled by this video.”

“It is profane, offensive and disturbing and in no way reflects our university or its values,” he added.

Professor Mehler, whose LinkedIn page identifies him as the founder of the Institute for the Study of Academic Racism at Ferris State and says that he teaches classes on “the history of science and the interface between science and racism,” did not respond to calls and an email seeking comment on Saturday, but on Friday, he told The Associated Press that the video was “a performance.”

Charles Bacon, the president of the Ferris Faculty Association, said in a statement on Saturday that the university’s response to the video was “intimidation and coercion directed at all faculty, not just Dr. Mehler.” He added that the association considered the suspension to be an “attack on academic freedom” that suppressed intellectual discourse.

Whether students watching the video considered it funny was unclear, but those tuning in to class for the first time would have heard Professor Mehler say, about five minutes in, “I stand before you today beholden to no human.”

He then tells students that if they want to complain to the dean, they can “go ahead” because he is “retiring at the end of this year” and does not care at all while mixing in six expletives.



Professor Mehler in the introductory video he posted on YouTube. via YouTube

As he shares his screen, a Word document can be seen on Professor Mehler’s computer that contains all 1,687 words of his speech, with certain parts (“MORE BAD NEWS”) appearing in bold type.

When it was time to discuss grading, he provided unusual direction: “You have no control over your grade.”

It doesn't matter how "hard you work or how great your grades are," he says, adding, "my grading system is based on the Calvinist doctrine of predestination" — a theory, developed by the 16th-century theologian John Calvin, that one's entrance into heaven or hell was predetermined by God, regardless of one's actions on earth.

"I randomly assign grades before the first day of class," Professor Mehler says. Later in the video, however, he says that "everything you need to earn an A is available" on an online learning page.

Professor Mehler repeatedly brings up the coronavirus pandemic in the video and talks about his concerns about in-person teaching.

"You people are just vectors of disease to me, and I don't want to be anywhere near you," he says.

He adds that students should contact him only over Zoom.

"Whatever you think of the risk of Covid, I live in a very different world," he says. "My risk is much greater than yours."

Ferris State University does not require its students to get a Covid-19 vaccine to attend classes.

Professor Mehler tells students that he is old enough to be their grandfather, and that if they care about their grandfather, they should stay away from him. But if they don't care "whether Grandpa lives or dies, by all means, come to class."

Mr. Bacon, the faculty association's president, said in a statement that Professor Mehler's classes "are very popular, in particular because he challenges students' assumptions and makes the class extremely interesting."

"In fact," Mr. Bacon said, "I am told that we have had administrators visit his class and come away with statements like, 'I wish I'd had a professor like you when I was in college.'"

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